

## Pastoral News

I just found this great article...about a church called...Community with a Cause, which serves people with mental and intellectual disabilities...so cool, check it out.

Most worship services led by Pastor Don Geller border on chaos. During a recent baptism, formal prayers competed with an impromptu performance of "Jingle Bells" by two little girls and intermittent shouts from a 12-year-old boy for parishioners' attention.

"It's a challenge, believe me," said the Rev. Geller, 61. "But it's the only way I can get everyone in the room."

He knows not to expect the quiet reverence that characterizes many Christians' worship experiences. When someone cries out or gets up to wander the room, the Rev. Geller keeps preaching.

His congregation, Community with a Cause, serves people with mental and intellectual disabilities, as well as their caregivers, in Lexington Park, Maryland. Disruptions are expected and even welcomed, because the Rev. Geller has had enough of pastors who put decorum over people.

"Of all places to accept someone, it ought to be the church," he said.

One in five U.S. adults has some form of mental or physical disability, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. However, few faith communities intentionally reach out to members of this group, and many may actually make disabled people and their caregivers feel unwelcome, said disability activists and the Rev. Geller, whose adult son,

## What's In This Month's Issue:

- Caritas Challenge
- Prayers Needed
- Birthdays and Anniversaries
- United Women of Faith

## May Calendar

**7th, 14th, 21st, & 28th**

Worship @ 10:30

**4th** UWF @ noon

**2nd, 9th, 16th, 23rd, and 30th**

Tops @ 9

Prayer Group @ 10:30

Bible Study @ 11

**25th**

Flashes Articles Due

**11th & 25th**

Crafting Group 9 till noon

**21st** Potluck

**8th Of June**

Disabilities Meeting @ 6

Gregory, was born with cerebral palsy and mental challenges.

“If 1-in-5 Americans has a disability, why do disabled people not make up one-fifth of our congregations? The easy answer is that the last time they worshipped, they were told they were disruptive and talked too loud,” the Rev. Geller said.

Over the past 15 to 20 years, academics, faith leaders and advocates for the disabled have joined to call for improved spatial and spiritual accommodations for believers with disabilities. The Rev. Geller’s Community with a Cause is one of many recent success stories, but there is much work yet to do to ensure that seminaries, churches and able-bodied believers are aware of the challenges keeping people with disabilities away from worship services, said Bill Gaventa, chairman and coordinator of the Collaborative on Faith and Disability.

“When you read the Bible through the lens of the experience of disability, what you see is ... everyone’s created in the image of God. Everyone should be included,” he said.

### **Spiritual exclusion**

Barriers to church participation come in many forms for men and women with disabilities, according to accommodation experts. Often, faith leaders aren’t trained on how to address a disabled person’s mobility, behavioral or spiritual needs, so they encourage families with an autistic son or a blind daughter to worship elsewhere.

“Churches would say to us, ‘We’re sorry, but we’re not staffed or equipped to care for your disabled son. Find somewhere else,’” the Rev. Geller said.

Bethany McKinney Fox, who wrote her doctoral dissertation on faith, disability and healing, said rejection is the result of disordered thinking. Christians may pray regularly for the sick, the weak and the mentally ill, but they rarely feel the same sense of urgency when it comes to altering worship services to make people with disabilities feel more welcome.

“When we pray for people with a disability or mental health issues, we pray like they aren’t in the room,” she said. And then our behavior makes it so that’s actually the case, said Fox, who serves as director of student services at Fuller Theological Seminary.

Exclusion may be as blatant as a building that’s difficult for someone with mobility challenges to navigate or shaming someone who makes noises or walks around during a service. It can also happen in more subtle ways, like when faith leaders present a disability as a problem to be solved, Fox noted.

“In the Bible, there are a lot of stories of Jesus healing people with blindness, deafness and mobility issues. Churches tend to use those narratives to create practices that are anything but healing for people with disabilities,” like describing heaven as a place where disabilities don’t exist, she said.

Instead of dwelling on heaven’s attributes or whether physical and intellectual disabilities are divine punishment, churches should focus on practical ways to include everyone in worship, Gaventa said.

"The question of why this happened is not really (what matters). The question is: 'What are we going to do?'" he said.

## **Separation anxiety**

The Rev. Geller first proposed Community with a Cause in one of his seminary classes. He designed a hypothetical church that would serve the needs of people like his son, Gregory, and their loved ones. His professor was so impressed that he challenged the Rev. Geller to turn his vision into a reality.

After he graduated from Wesley Theological Seminary in May, the Rev. Geller worked with the church where he served as a seminary intern, Lexington Park United Methodist Church, to formally launch the mission congregation Community with a Cause. At its first gathering in September, the new ministry welcomed around 60 worshippers.

"This new church is a safe place for (people with disabilities) to worship and to find God on their own level in their own way," the Rev. Geller said.

Community with a Cause currently holds services every other Saturday in Lexington Park's fellowship hall. Although the Rev. Geller enjoys the support of his fellow ministers, there is little overlap between what he does and the regular Sunday morning services

It creates a tension. It shouldn't exist, but in reality it does," he said.

The potential for strained relationships between a disability ministry and the wider congregation is one of the reason why Fox argues that efforts to incorporate people with disabilities should happen within the central worship service, rather than in a separate space.

"I don't disparage separate worship services, but they shouldn't be the end goal," she said. "Ideally, we're all the body of Christ together. We need to have a space where we can all learn together."

## **Taking action**

The path to more inclusive worship services is different for every church, but there are certain steps that will apply to everyone, Fox and Gaventa said.

For example, all faith communities benefit from listening to people with disabilities describe their hopes and needs, Fox said, noting that this isn't as intuitive as she would expect.

"I worked with one group of church leaders ... who were trying to decide if their campus was wheelchair accessible," she said. "They had members of the leadership team get in wheelchairs and wheel around to check it out, instead of asking" congregants with mobility issues about their experiences to learn the best solutions.

Another valuable initiative is to have church members reflect on whether their expectations around worship are Bible-based or socially constructed, Gaventa said. Worshippers may not be used to someone crying out during a service or walking around in the back of the room, but that doesn't mean it should be discouraged.

You have to ask the question: Is this what God teaches, or is this just tradition?" he said, adding that disruptions won't happen as much when people with disabilities are given a chance to learn worship routines.

"You have to guide people through what will be a strange experience," he said.

The end goal should be a faith community that both welcomes people with disabilities and provides opportunities for them to share their gifts with the congregation, Gaventa noted.

"If it's done right and with the support and involvement of the congregation, families affected by disability will feel comfortable, because they'll know there won't be 'tut-tuts' and bad looks" when a disabled person makes noise, he said.

### **Fulfilling faith**

Services at Community with a Cause represent at least one potential destination for churches working to be more inclusive. They may be chaotic, but they also allow for full participation from people of all abilities.

"If you walk into (a service), you may be greeted by (someone with a disability). During songs, many of them come up to the front to lead" the singing, the Rev. Geller said. "They are not just in our worship services. They are part of the worship services."

As the Rev. Geller prepares for his faith community's first Christmas, he's taken time to reflect on the many gifts Community with a Cause has already given him, both professionally and personally.

"For many years, my wife and I never believed that our son, who has the mental capacity of a 6-year-old, could understand the love of God. But we were wrong," he said. "I believe when Christ said, 'Let the little children come to me,' he didn't necessarily mean young in age. (People like Gregory) have a childlike faith."

What are your thoughts on that article?

Peace, René



**Free Handbell Concert**  
**By BellaCristo**  
**Saturday May 6th at 4 pm**  
**At Millwood Presbyterian Church**  
**3223 N Marguerite Rd, Spokane Valley**

# *Caritas Challenge*



*This month's challenge is Laundry Soap!*

*Let's get at least 50 containers!*

*We can do this!*



May Birthday  
17th Kenneth Ledoux

.Wishing our friends and family  
a “happy. . .”,  
a “merry. . .”,  
a “best wishes . . .”,  
and a “blessings . . .”  
for their special day.

## PRAYER

### **Hand of God to Touch**

A New Day  
Mental health  
Son with job issues  
Our Nation  
Shooting victims and their families  
The Craft Fair

### **Health and Healing**

Jean – Back pain  
Brother with Ulcer in foot

### **Continued Prayers**

Linda Stancil in Avalon  
Sister Cathy  
Roxy – Cancer back  
Roger Kittredge – esophageal cancer  
Denise – 2 strokes recently  
Dotie Godley  
Wendy and Dan Montgomery – procedures  
and surgery  
Friends brother, Patrick with cancer

### **Prayers of Gratitude**

for people that help others





United  
Women  
in Faith

The Fowler Unit of United Women in Faith will meet May 4, 2023 in Corinthian Hall at noon. The lunch will be a potluck. The program will be “A Call to Prayer and Self-Denial.” The offering taken will go to support the ongoing racial justice work of United Women in Faith’s national office, both the campaign to end the school to prison pipeline and to implement the Charter for Racial Justice at all levels of the organization.

This will be our last meeting until September.

## Potluck



Join us May 21st for a  
pot-luck lunch.

Bring your favorite casserole, side dish, meat  
entray, etc

Fowler United Methodist Church

3928 N. Howard Street  
Spokane, WA 99205  
Fowlerumc@yahoo.com  
509-325-3242

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3928 N. Howard St.

Spokane, WA 99205

(509) 325-3242

Facebook: [FowlerUnited  
MethodistChurch](#)  
[fowlerumc@yahoo.com](mailto:fowlerumc@yahoo.com)

[Fowlerumc.org](http://Fowlerumc.org)

**Pastor:**

**Rev. René Devantier**  
Editor: Diane Strobeck  
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# COME AND CRAFT WITH US!



The 2nd and fourth Thursday  
at 9am